

Once upon a time, 'the best place to shoot ducks' was Miller's Island

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Where was the best place to hunt waterfowl in the Upper Chesapeake Bay?

The most likely answer would be the Susquehanna Flats off Havre de Grace, but that might not necessarily be the correct one, according to "The Best Place to Shoot Ducks, Miller's Island," the latest book by C. John Sullivan Jr., a Bel Air resident and waterfowling historian and collector.

Some of you, particularly boaters or bird watchers, may have visited the Hart-Miller Island State Park in recent years.

Others are probably familiar with the recent history, say of the last 40 to 50 years, of the island in the Chesapeake Bay at the mouth of Back River in eastern Baltimore County. The land can easily be seen from the Rocky Point Golf Course at the end of Back River Neck.

There's an even richer history of what was actually once three smaller islands, however, one that predates the political and environmental battle over them that ensued in the latter quarter of the last century. It's a story that begins with tobacco farming and commercial fishing in colonial times and eventually gave way to sporting endeavors, in particular waterfowl hunting.

To say the islands were once known as a sportsman's paradise would be putting it mildly, according to Sullivan's research. What popularly became known as Miller's Island in the latter half of the 19th Century was a major hunting ground for those pursuing wild ducks and geese and other migratory birds, particularly the American - or tundra swan - that was much coveted as a trophy and culinary delight prior to 1918, when federal law outlawed hunting them.

Also coveted by collectors are swan decoys. A portion of "The Best Place to Shoot Ducks," a title that comes from glowing accounts in a newspaper legal ad when the islands were being sold to satisfy a debt in 1870, recounts the author's quest for a personal Holy Grail, one of the swan decoys used at the Miller's Island Ducking Club that were made by an obscure Baltimore carver named Al Bell.

The book, the eighth Sullivan has authored or co-authored, most having waterfowl hunting and artifact collecting as the subject, traces the early civilized history of the islands which, topographically speaking, were likely once an extension of the peninsula separating the Patapsco and Back Rivers where they flow into the bay. Over the years storms separated a portion of the Patapsco Neck, as it is called, from the mainland and then further cut the lengthy island into

three smaller ones: Hart, Miller and Pleasure, although names varied over time, as the book explains.

Using land records and other written accounts, Sullivan traces the ownership of the islands and their rise to prominence as an exclusive duck hunting preserve in the latter half of the 19th Century, a distinction that also continued into the first quarter of the 20th. The book also explores the history of the Miller's Island Ducking Club, much in the manner in which he wrote in a earlier book about waterfowl gunning at Carroll's Island, some miles north at the mouth of the Gunpowder River.

Sullivan's research for the Miller's Island book includes accounts from personal diaries and hunting journals kept by some of the men who hunted there. Some of these accounts include how the hunters got from Baltimore and other nearby places by horse and buggy, streetcar and early automobiles. It was a long day's journey from the city to get to the shooting grounds, the author notes.

Though bridges were built on two occasions to link the islands with the mainland and each other, storms took their toll on them and for most of the time they served hunting preserves, the only way to get to them was by boat - as is the case today.

As with many earlier books, this one includes plenty of archival photos of Miller's Island hunters, their guns and decoys, the clubhouse - which appears to have washed into the bay as what was then called Hart Island eroded in the later half of the 20th Century - and of surviving decoys and artifacts from Sullivan's personal collection and those of others and the Maryland Historical Society.

As hunting declined prior to World War II, a casualty of development along the shoreline and depleted waterfowl stocks, other recreational uses took over on the islands, mostly boating and bathing, though these and some other development schemes were relatively short-lived. One of the more interesting photographs in the book, from 1966, shows the author and the future Harford state delegate William Cox flanking George P. Mahoney, the Democratic nominee for governor that year who also owned the islands at the time and was trying to make a go with them as a bathing and amusement center. (Mahoney lost the governor's race that year to Spiro T. Agnew.)

The book touches somewhat briefly on the more recent history of the islands, which were ravaged by erosion for decades in the later half of the last century and appeared in danger of sinking into the bay completely. When plans were being advanced in the early 1970s to use the area for the deposit of millions of tons of silt and other material that was to be dredged from the shipping channels leading to the Baltimore Harbor, residents of the Back River Neck area and environmentalists found an ally in then-congressman Clarence D. Long, who also represented all or parts of Harford County during the period. It took many years, but after Long was defeated in the early 1980s by pro-dredging advocate Helen Delich Bentley, the regulatory hurdles were eventually cleared and the dredging began, with the spoil area being created around what was left of the islands.

"I think most residents of the Back River Neck area today embrace what has been done," Sullivan said in a recent interview. According to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, which manages the area in partnership with the Maryland Environmental Service, the latter which supervised the spoil deposit operations, Hart-Miller today encompasses some 1,100 acres and provides camping areas, an observation tower and a bathing beach. Most of the public access, however, is concentrated into a small area for, as the DNR website notes, much of the park is still in the developmental stage.

Sullivan said the islands have become a great place for bird watching and he is happy with what has been done, even though none of the historical sites he wrote about remain.

"The Best Place to Shoot Ducks" is available locally at Preston's in Bel Air and at the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum and is priced at about \$35. The book is published by Full House Press in Bel Air.

A portion of the proceeds from the book's sales will be given to the C. John Sullivan Jr. Endowment, established by author "to further the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum's interpretation, documentation and preservation of the history of Chesapeake Bay decoys and waterfowling," according to its mission statement.

A former director of property assessments for the state and prior to that for Harford County, Sullivan served as director of the Havre de Grace Decoy Museum after his retirement from state service in mid-2011 until this past February. He still serves as the museum's waterfowling historian and consultant. He was also recently appointed to the Harford County Liquor Control Board.